

EXISTENTIALISM: A PHILOSOPHY OF HOPE OR DESPAIR?*

I DON'T suppose that anyone who has lived in Paris during the two or three years that followed its liberation from the Nazi occupation can ever think about that city in quite the same way as the average tourist thinks about it or, for that matter, as it is depicted in travel folders, magazine advertisements and the cinema. For no war comes to an end as abruptly as it is begun nor, surely, can any decree or treaty or celebration bring to populations the profound awareness that the long nightmare is over, that the time for peace and normal living has at last arrived. Misery has its own inertia, and for many months the sense of loss and abandonment continues; to each one there cling all the harsh memories of war and, too often, of enslavement.

It is hardly my intention to describe the Paris of that unhappy time, but it has often struck me that one of the reasons existentialism, or the existentialist movement, is so generally misinterpreted is that its critics seldom take into account the circumstances that surrounded its inception and development. It is one thing to envisage ideas as the inhabitants of books and lecture halls and classrooms, and another as an intimate and inseparable part of our daily lives; and this is just what existentialism was during that strange transitional time in Paris when the vast mantrap of oppression was suddenly lifted from a whole city and left its population squinting and bewildered under the sharp white light of freedom. I do not mean that Paris was full of existentialists, that the flower vendors and housewives and bus conductors were all

* A public lecture delivered at the Rice Institute on October 11, 1953.

existentialists, or even looked like existentialists, presuming it is possible to look like an existentialist. But there was something in the air, amid all the sadness and privation and bewilderment, and I think that something was the conviction—vague, it is true, and generally unformulated—that through torture and peril and humiliation something in each of us remains inviolate, something can never be taken away, even temporarily, even for an instant, something like a hard unalterable core at the center of the human spirit, that may be called—perhaps for want of a better word—liberty. And this was felt not only by those of the underground movement who risked their lives to sustain it, but by those who tried to go on living as best they could, who tried to make the abnormal seem normal and the unnatural seem natural. To be sure, it was felt more vividly by those who resisted, because nothing brings truth into focus so sharply as peril, and it was among the elite of these that existentialism first emerged as a dynamic and eminently pertinent system of human thought.

There may be some who will protest at this point that existentialism is strictly speaking not a French philosophy at all, nor even, indeed, a philosophy to begin with. Jacques Maritain, for example, has remarked that “the misfortune of existentialism has been that it has risen and developed within the realm of philosophy . . . and yet it is a philosophy against philosophy.” To the second of these objections I would reply that what has made existentialism so vital, or in any case so influential, seems to lie in its very stand against traditional philosophy, and in the way it is committed to a form of truth so close to the fundamental realities of human existence that it defies ordinary analysis. Perhaps this is why the best of existentialist writing is not to be found in tracts and essays—

such as this one, for example—but in works of a creative and a semi-creative nature. I have already hinted that existentialism is concerned with human liberty; I should add that it is also, and by the same token, a philosophy of action. It is not primarily a philosophy that seeks to interpret and explain; rather, it seeks to lay bare the fundamental enigma of what we are. And this, it seems to me, is precisely what constitutes the specific function of creative literature. Certainly not all literature can be said to be existentialist, and only a small part of it may be said to be consciously existentialist, but surely our greatest myths and stories are concerned less with answering questions than with asking them. It is false to suppose that Oedipus, for example, solved the riddle of his own existence—he merely made it clearer; and his riddle is our own. It is foolish to think that Hamlet answered the question “to be or not to be”; he merely posed it with passion and urgency. And since existentialism, like literature, is committed to interrogation rather than affirmation, it seems to me that it finds its best expression in the novel and the drama, or even, as in the case of Kierkegaard and Gabriel Marcel, in personal diaries; although it is true that others, like Jaspers, Husserl, and Heidegger, have remained what we may call pure philosophers, and even Jean-Paul Sartre, with whom I shall be particularly concerned, has attempted formal description in at least one important work and a couple of lesser ones. Finally, there are a number of novelists and playwrights of postwar France who can scarcely be called philosophers, at least in this sense, and yet whose work bears the existentialist stamp. Most important among these, I think, are Albert Camus, Maurice Blanchot, and Simone de Beauvoir, and many are the little-known writers of the postwar generation who have fallen under the influence of existentialist doctrine.

Nor should we neglect those whose works may be described as existentialist in tone, in atmosphere, in significance, although their authors were more certainly than not unaware of any connection, if they knew about existentialism at all. The Czech novelist Franz Kafka is often designated as an unconsciously "existentialist" writer, and so are William Faulkner, André Malraux, Dostoievski. With some reservations, the same thing may be said of certain aspects of the work of André Gide, Stendhal, and Ernest Hemingway.

There remains the first objection: that existentialism is not French and that it is not new. As a self-conscious doctrine it is, indeed, well over a hundred years old, its founder having been the Danish religious thinker Søren Kierkegaard. Other admittedly existentialist thinkers are the Germans—Edmund Husserl, who stumbled into existentialism by way of a branch of philosophy called phenomenology; Karl Jaspers, generally considered to be a disciple of Kierkegaard; and Martin Heidegger, a former rector and lecturer at the University of Freiburg, to whom Sartre obviously owes a great deal. France itself had an existentialist philosopher as far back as 1930 in the person of Gabriel Marcel, who belongs to what may be called the Catholic Wing. Furthermore, it has been contended that just as there are unconscious existentialists among creative writers, so there are unconscious existentialists among philosophers. Was Socrates the first existentialist? The point has been argued, and I see no reason why it should not be true. The same claim has been made for Nietzsche, for Schelling, for the earlier Hegel, for Pascal and Descartes, and even, with good reason, for Henri Bergson.

The plain fact is that whether one chooses to consider existentialism a philosophy, or an anti-philosophy, or neither, in one way or another its basic point of view has been an

ingredient of human thought for many centuries, and it is not unlikely that each of us has at one time or another thought, as it were, "existentially" about his problems and condition. It may very well be that moments of crisis, of danger, of despair, tend to compel us to the existentialist point of view, and surely this is one reason why the movement became so popular in France at the moment in its history of which I have been speaking. For it was then that existentialism ceased to be a problem for professional philosophers and became a force, a conviction, a climate. There is no doubt that it will be identified with postwar intellectual France in the same way that surrealism, for example, is identified with the span between the wars, symbolism with the turn of the last century, and realism with the middle nineties. Each of these doctrines—and there are many, for France is the great progenitor of the world's "isms"—must be explained not only in its own terms, but in terms of the historic moment that gave it urgency and vitality; and, finally, of the men who lived that moment.

The man who is surely most directly responsible for what some call the existentialist vogue is Jean-Paul Sartre. Born in Paris of a middle-class family, Sartre received his earliest education in the provinces, returning to the capital for advanced studies in philosophy at the celebrated *École Normale*. This was followed by sixteen months in the military service and a short spell as a teacher in a *lycée*—the French equivalent of our high school. At the outbreak of war, in 1939, Sartre was thirty-four. He enlisted in the medical corps and was taken prisoner in June of 1940. Returning to a defeated France and to a Paris darkened by the shadow of the enemy, he enrolled in the underground movement, later, it is said, organizing his own group, and at the same time revealing a

brilliant aptitude for journalism as a writer for various clandestine publications. He continued this career after the liberation as a correspondent for the famed newspaper *Combat*. His assignments during this period included a trip to America and I presume that it was in America, too, that he came to appreciate writers like Faulkner and Steinbeck. In any case it would be difficult to appraise his talent as a novelist without taking into account their influence.

As a novelist Sartre was already known in his own country as the author of a short work bearing the quaintly existentialist title *Nausea*, which is the formidably depressing story of a man engaged in the lucid contemplation of himself. He ends by discovering that the world is absurd and human life even more so, and slowly flounders in what can only be described as a miasma of subjectivity. It is noteworthy that the scene of the novel is Le Havre, where Sartre had taught school for a while. But both the scene and the action are so slight that it is difficult to call *Nausea* a novel at all. A number of short stories, collected under the title *The Wall*, are livelier but they too are concerned with the subjective side of life, and it was not until the tetralogy *The Roads to Liberty*, the first volume of which was published in 1945,* that Sartre found that his talent as a creative writer lay in the projection of human character not from within but from without, somewhat as a realist or a naturalist would, so that this vast and lusty canvas of life in Europe before the outbreak of war and during the first weeks of hostilities is nothing if not an intricate weaving together of many situations and actions as diverse as the characters who accomplish them. The result is that the reader has the impression not so much that he is following a story as that he is perusing a rapidly turning

* The fourth volume has not yet appeared.

kaleidoscope or a series of rapid flashes, in which characters and situations are somehow fused, so that one is often at a loss to tell whether the characters determine the situations or the situations the characters. And since the action skips without any sort of warning from Paris to the Riviera to North Africa to Spain and even to America the reader sooner or later gets the impression of a sort of totality. It seems that the author is saying that every man is endlessly involved in specific situations, that his reality depends on his being so involved, and that each situation is a facet of the history of the world; indeed that in some way the action of each human being determines the destiny of every other human being. But even more important, as we shall see, is the role that liberty plays in Sartre's world, and I should not hesitate to say that for want of a hero in this formless imbroglio of characters who seem to be in perpetual crisis—the fact that one of them, Mathieu, resembles Sartre like a brother does not alter things very much—the central character is not a character at all, but a concept: human liberty. It is perhaps because Sartre strives to leave their liberty intact that his characters move about so freely and that the novel seems to be in so many places at once. The fact that there is so much action and so little plot almost leads one to believe that Sartre would define plot as the technique by which an author “enslaves” his creations.

Nevertheless, many admirers of Sartre claim that it is in the drama that his creative talents find their clearest expression and there is much to be said for this, particularly when one considers how much of the novels is made up of dialogue. But their plot may scarcely be said to be their strong point except where, as in the case of *The Flies*, Sartre is inspired by the Greeks, or where he is writing for the cinema, which

is the case of *The Chips Are Down*. Once again, it seems to me, the real subject is liberty, whether it is moral liberty, as in *The Devil and the Good Lord*, or political liberty, as in *Dirty Hands*, or the relation of the liberty of one person to that of others, as in *No Exit*. In all, Sartre has written some half-dozen plays, ranging in length from one act to the recent and ambitious *Devil and the Good Lord*, which runs for almost four hours. Their settings include mythical kingdoms in medieval and modern Europe, France under the occupation, the American South, and a drab furnished room which, the audience soon discovers, is Hell. Although one or two of them are spoiled, according to some critics, by a rather broad streak of melodrama, their real interest lies in their characters' probing of isolated situations, rather than that accumulation of excitement from situation to situation which we call suspense.

To all of this a complete account of Sartre's activities should join a large number of essays on everything from labor unions to poetry (for in 1946 he became chief editor of one of Paris' most important revues, *Modern Times*), and of course the works of a purely philosophical nature. The earliest of these are relatively brief, and are concerned with special problems relating to the imagination and, significantly, to Husserl's conception of consciousness as intentional rather than structural. Sartre's major work, which bears the forbidding title *Being and Nothingness*, appeared in 1943 and turned out to be a huge tome of some 700 closely printed pages. It is not recommended for light summer reading, or for any reading at all, I should imagine, unless one happens to have mastered beforehand the perplexities of advanced philosophical jargon. Suffice it to say, at this point, that here Sartre, abandoning isolated problems in the field of ontology, takes up the problem of being—or, if you will, human exist-

ence—as a whole, and exposes at length the underlying themes of his doctrine. I suspect that there is an appalling discrepancy between the number of people who have read this weighty volume and the number of those who claim to have read it. It has been called, perhaps a trifle ironically, the Bible of Existentialism.

Clearly, then, the problem of existentialism, even from an historical point of view, is a very complex one. It is difficult, for one thing, to speak of any particular philosopher without being concerned with what he owes to a wide variety of others, starting with Socrates. It is difficult to tell, so far as existentialism is concerned, where philosophy ends and literature begins. Finally, it is feasible to affirm that existentialism may not legitimately be called a philosophy at all. And yet one fact remains, and it is simply this: that were it not for Sartre and what we may call the French School, most of us should not have heard of existentialism at all; for it was Sartre himself who saw that existentialism, unlike traditional philosophical theories, has no validity at all unless it is anchored in experience, and particularly the sort of experience that he, Sartre, had undergone in a France where liberty had ceased to be a slogan and became something you fight and die for.

The French are a disconcerting people. Not only have they endowed Western civilization with some of its purest and most decisive ideas, but they insist upon wrapping them up in whimsical packages. This, I suppose, attests to their irrepressible gaiety, or in any case to their sense of humor, but it leads to a certain amount of misunderstanding. For example, it gives to many people, Frenchmen as well as foreigners, the impression that French intellectual, literary, and artistic history is very largely accomplished in the cafes by boisterous and uninhibited young men whose buoyancy is

exceeded only by their fervent disregard for convention. During the Romantic movement these colorful and somewhat lunatic habitués of the cabarets and bistros of the Left Bank called themselves *Jeune France*—"Young France"—and during the symbolist and impressionist movements, Decadents. When surrealism and cubism were in vogue they were Dadaists, and now that existentialism has become, as we say, all the rage, it is not surprising that these joyful antagonists of middle-class platitude should have adopted the existentialist banner for their very own. To be sure, they are Bohemians of a very modern sort, these so-called Existentialists, and possibly they harbor some vague notion that an addiction to disarrayed clothing and some of the more cacophonous forms of Dixieland Jazz is an expression of Sartre's idea of human liberty. The truth of the matter is that they are no more representative of existentialism, which is in reality the sternest of philosophies, than they were of romanticism or surrealism. They do provide a good deal of amusing and often profitable publicity, and surround the doctrines themselves with an aura of charming insanity which tends to give to their contemporaries the illusion that it is they, and not Victor Hugo, Auguste Renoir, or Pablo Picasso, who are making artistic and literary history, an illusion which history itself quickly rectifies.

I must confess, however, that the recollection I most frequently associate with existentialism has nothing to do with the intellectual cliques of the Latin Quarter or Saint-Germain-des-Prés. At about this time I was living in a Paris apartment not far from the Parc Monceau, and one of my neighbors was a small French boy named Claude. One day I gave Claude an old copy of *Life* magazine I happened to have, and not long afterwards he knocked at my door, explaining that he

was frankly puzzled by one of the pictures. It turned out that the picture was part of an advertisement, as I recall, on the subject of aluminum awnings, but it was not the awnings that interested Claude; it was the little boy in the picture. He was standing on a lawn in front of a house (equipped, presumably, with the product in question) and he was eating an ice cream cone. What, Claude wanted to know, is that? Nor was Claude's ignorance surprising, when one remembers that he belonged to that unfortunate generation which had grown up in a France where milk was rationed by the pint, butter by the gram, and sugar by the half pound. So I gave him what I thought was a very accurate and succinct definition of the substance called ice cream. His reply was a look of direct bewilderment. I decided to try again, this time attacking the concept from the standpoint of ingredients. Having failed just as dismally this time, I went into a long story of why children like ice cream, when they eat it, and what they will do to get it. All this met with not the slightest response, and I had the feeling that I was trying to explain an obscure problem of algebra to someone who had not yet learned simple addition. The look of reproach on that boy's face haunted me for many weeks afterward, until one day I heard that ice cream, if not ice cream cones, was sold at the Paris chapter of the American Legion, which is just off the Champs Élysées. I managed to acquire a pint of the precious commodity and rushed home in time to stumble over Claude playing the French version of marbles at the front door. His mother, the concierge, promptly rushed out a spoon and lo and behold, as spoonful after spoonful swept to their destination, the light came over Claude. His eyes shone and his lips, as besmirched as any child's should be—chocolate was all I could get—broke into a broad smile. This was ice cream: a

stickiness on the face, a coldness and a sweetness in the throat, a solid at first and yet somehow, too, a liquid, so that you were never quite sure whether you ate it or drank it; it was all of these things and yet one thing—an experience, unique and wonderful.

I don't know whether this anecdote, if one can call it that, will strike anyone as having a moral, but it does have one for me, and it is this: that what we may call the sheer experience of living from day to day, from hour to hour, from moment to moment, is somehow beyond any sort of rational explanation. Now, it is precisely with some such idea as this that existentialism takes its start. I do not mean that it denies to the intelligence its long-held supremacy since the days of Descartes, but rather that, like the philosophy of Bergson, it restricts its role and importance. Certainly, simply by using his intelligence, man has learned a great deal not only about the universe but about himself, and between behaviorism on the one hand and psychoanalysis on the other, there is not much about his conduct for which, on the rational level, man cannot supply what appears to be a rational explanation. And yet there is a catch. Somehow, in describing the nature of ice cream to Claude, my explanation, as rational or as scientific as it could be, had missed fire. For clearly, the only thing that could have satisfied Claude was experience itself. To be sure, it is plain common sense to say that words can never replace actions, and we are all familiar with the adage about sticks and stones. But if this is true, if somehow there is a profound antinomy between our actions and our explanations, if man is not one but two, a creature who acts and a creature who reasons, then man himself contains a mystery that can never be ultimately dispelled, and it is the mystery of his sheer capacity to behave in particular ways in particular

experiences. For the existentialist the source of our actions does not lie in our reasons for them, but in something he calls our "subjectivity," in other words, some sort of pure consciousness—Sartre calls it "non-thetic" consciousness—which exists before any reasons we might supply to explain its existence. It is a little as though the existentialists were replacing Descartes' famous "I think, therefore I am" with a proposition more fundamental still: "I exist, therefore I am." Man may ask the question "why" about many things with reasonable expectations of finding an answer; he can never ask the same question about himself because he *is* the question. He can never affect the juncture between his subjectivity and his reasoning about his subjectivity—he is always, as Heidegger puts it, "outside of himself." Fundamentally, therefore, existentialism is an attempt to place our subjective selves at the center of philosophical investigation. At the same time, it discredits traditional systems and theories about the universe on the ground that these systems have never taken into account the fact that they have their source in a particular human being, in the pure "I" which thought them up. As Kierkegaard has said, "Most systematizers in relation to their system fare like a man who builds a huge palace and himself lives next door to it in a barn."

I have, perhaps, oversimplified the question, but it may serve to lead me to some of the themes which are a part of existentialist doctrine. I think it is already clear that one of these, at least so far as Sartre is concerned, is liberty. For surely, if our actions are in some way anterior to our reasons for them, then it must follow that they can be restricted by absolutely nothing, and the fundamental reality of each human being is that he is totally and unconditionally free. It is not enough to say that liberty is subjective: it *is* our subjec-

tivity, and therefore utterly different from liberty as we ordinarily think of it, that is, liberty on the rational level. Liberty in this sense, being objective, can readily be defined in some way—usually as a collection of “rights,” although few of us would be likely to agree exactly as to what those rights are; and whether the definition is provided by Thomas Jefferson or John Stuart Mill or Webster’s dictionary, it is something we say we “enjoy,” something that can be given to us or taken away. This is not liberty as Sartre thinks of it. I should hate to use, in so cursory and slender a summation as this, the term “metaphysical,” but it would be difficult to ascribe a more common one to a sort of liberty that is so intimately bound up with existence itself. Since man is nothing if not experience, since at every moment of his history man is acting in some way, then surely his main concern must be to choose one sort of action among many. At every moment, therefore, he makes a choice, even if his choice is so simple as, for example, whether to light a cigarette or not to light a cigarette, whether to read a newspaper or walk around the block, whether to go to a concert or to a movie. Our constant question is “Shall I or shall I not?”—and even should we suspend the question, like Hamlet, or choose not to choose, we have already made a sort of a choice, which consists in not making one. Man is that creature who always chooses, and the reason, simple enough, is that he is always in a situation, he is always at the center of a network of circumstances in which he cannot remain fixed except, of course, at the risk of ceasing to exist. To put it in another way, man never “is”; he is always “here” or “there”—a distinction the German existentialist Heidegger draws when he insists upon the difference in his own vocabulary between the verb “to be”—*sein*—and “to be there”—*dasein*. For Heidegger it is the *dasein*

and not the *sein* which signifies human reality. We have already seen that this was Sartre's most striking originality as a novelist. For the existentialist writer man is concrete and specific rather than, as for the classicist, abstract and universal; but his realism, instead of rising, as does that of Flaubert, from the wellsprings of positivism, has its source in human subjectivity. For since there is no such thing as an abstract man, but always a man-plus-a-situation, then each of us must be unique and irreplaceable, for at each instant our liberty, to use an expression dear to Sartre, is "engaged"; at each instant we must decide to do this or that.

It is, indeed, our decisions that give the world order and sense. My cigarette, for example, is absurd except as something that I may or may not smoke. In the same way, the world is absurd to Alice after she has gone through the looking glass because, once in Wonderland, she is no longer the center of her own situations but moves, so to speak, in the periphery of some one else's: the mad Hatter's or the Red Queen's. It is this same impression, that of being ourselves and yet a pure object, that we encounter in our dreams. The heroes of the Czech novelist, Franz Kafka, are also instructive in this regard. Because they have lost their liberty—that is, the initiative of choice—they seem to have lost their foothold on the universe. They are always, so to speak, on the outside looking in, and they wander about in their towns and villages with the obscure awareness that they are familiar to everyone, and yet that no one, not even one they love, is familiar to them. The fact is, however, that Kafka's novels are as contrived and liberal in their fantasy as Lewis Carroll's tale, for they are based on a premise that is impossible. Yet all of us, as we shall see, tend to deny our liberty; all of us are possessed in some degree with the nostalgia to be a pure

object. And conversely, few of us are ever totally aware of the absolute liberty which is at the source of our existence, for such an awareness can never be a kind of knowledge but rather a kind of feeling, perhaps, indeed, a kind of intuition not unlike Bergson's. To be aware of one's liberty in this way is to feel profoundly that each choice we make, being a total manifestation of our liberty, is itself total and places our whole being, as Sartre says, in question, like the spinning of a roulette wheel when the chips are down. The specific emotion that accompanies this revelation of our absolute liberty is defined by Sartre as a sort of anguish—Heidegger calls it "dread"—but to all intents and purposes they are referring to the same thing. We feel dread, or anguish, when we have the sense of advancing into the future as into a sheer emptiness and, literally, that our existence has nothing to fall back on except its capacity to go forward. It is an emotion, I am sure, that we have all experienced at one moment or another, although I suppose that, like our moments of fear, we do our best to forget them. But whereas fear is always fear of something, anguish, or dread, is literally fear of nothing. It is the awareness that we are "in suspense" or, to use an expression of the poet Paul Valéry, of being "an ever future hollowness." It has the effect of stripping our existence of the respectable attire with which our reason bedecks it.

Anguish, however, does not occur alone. By itself it may perhaps best be described as a metaphysical emotion, if one can speak of such a thing, but it is deepened by a sort of moral uneasiness which accompanies it like its echo. For clearly, unlimited liberty implies unlimited responsibility. If, for example, I go to war, I am responsible not only for my own killing, but for all the killing and misery that the war causes. If I stay home, I am responsible for all the havoc that

the enemy causes. If I do not send a Care package to the starving millions of India then it is I, and not someone else, who am responsible for the starving millions. Moreover, since we are particularly concerned with relating existentialism to its historical context, it is interesting to note the relevancy of this highly moral, if not stoic, overtone of existentialist doctrine for Frenchmen, like Sartre and those of his circle, living in Paris during the occupation. For the occupation had the effect of placing an entire population in a like situation, of posing to every citizen the same question and the same alternatives: shall I seek freedom or shall I remain a slave? No doubt, from an existentialist viewpoint, his deliberations would run as follows: "If I am a slave I cannot say that it is the fault of the enemy. On the contrary, it was he who merely created the situation in which I must choose between being a slave and being a free man. Therefore, should I remain a slave, it is because I, and no one else, have chosen to be one. Moreover, this is a choice I have made not only for myself but for my compatriots as well. On the other hand, if I choose to be free, my only course is to resist, and in doing so I place myself in danger. I can, of course, seek to escape these alternatives by masking my liberty to myself, that is, by pretending that my enslavement is not my fault, but the fault of the enemy, and therefore inevitable. And yet it *is* my fault; otherwise I would have chosen to resist. The point is that in either case I choose freely, and my choice, whether of enslavement or resistance, is a responsibility that I assume."

By the same token, a Czech or a Hungarian living under Communist domination who neither resists nor flees through the iron curtain is as responsible for the moral and political crimes of Communist Russia as a member of the Comintern. For it is impossible to imagine a situation in which choice

of action is so restricted that our liberty ceases to exist. As paradoxical as it may sound, our liberty is inescapable. Man, says Sartre, is condemned to be free. And yet it is true that just as there were many Frenchmen in occupied France who chose revolt by joining the underground movement—and more likely than not without having entertained the slightest notion of liberty as Sartre describes it—so there were many who not only accepted enslavement but justified it. For since few of us have the fortitude or the temerity to go through life in perpetual anguish—not even, I suppose, an existentialist philosopher—our perpetual tendency is to mask our liberty to ourselves, to imagine that we do things because, in one way or another, we have to do them. On one level our lives are a series of actions, choices, projects, and on another a series of justifications, and we place our faith in the latter, although in a very deep sense, since to mask our liberty is at the same time to mask our responsibility, we are guilty of a sort of attenuated cowardice, something like the existentialist version of original sin. Sartre calls it “bad faith.” And yet cowardice—or “bad faith”—is the last thing of which we would accuse ourselves. How is this possible? The answer lies in Kierkegaard’s assertion that truth, when it is related to the human, is always paradoxical. It is not enough to say, as do traditional moral doctrines, that man is not one but two, for example, good and evil, flesh and spirit, and so on. It is truer to say that he is ambiguous: that when he is one he is really the other, and vice versa. But this ambiguity is moral only by extension. Necessarily, for the existentialist philosopher, every ethical question raises a metaphysical one—or, better still, an ontological one. In reality it is our being itself which is ambiguous.

What indeed do we mean by the word “being”? It is, I

suppose, as vague a term as one can imagine, and most of us would reply, as does the existentialist, that "being" is what we are. Sartre calls it the "in-itself," by which he means that it is our way of thinking of ourselves as though we were objects with fixed characteristics. From this point of view, "man" is an "in-itself" in the manner of a chair, a stone, a dog, a seashell; like each of these objects he may easily be generalized; he may be said to have the "essence" of a man in the same way that we speak of the essence of a seashell, to which all seashells would in some way correspond. This was Plato's conception, and to a large extent it is one we all share. In any case, it is what we mean when we refer to our "character" or, more generally, to "human nature." We even speak of certain "laws" of human nature which we must all obey at the risk of ceasing to be human. I once knew a man who was so ill-tempered that he antagonized everyone who met him, and when I asked him why, he looked at me as though my question were foolish. I imagine that his reply, if he had made one, would have been: "It is just the way I am" or "I was born that way" or even "I take after my father." Similarly, many of us are inclined to excuse criminals because, as we say, it is their nature, they just can't help it; or else we blame their wickedness on their upbringing or their past environment, which amounts to the same thing. This tendency is carried to absurd extremes, according to Sartre, by the psychoanalysts. It is true that for Freud, as for Sartre, man is ambiguous, but in dividing him up, like a pie, into two unequal parts, one conscious and the other unconscious, he committed the sophistry of explaining man as though he were an object while affirming that he is a subject. As a subject, each of us conducts himself in one way or another, as a criminal or a model citizen, as a good father or one who beats

his children, as a misanthrope or a social climber: when it comes to analyzing our conduct, the psychiatrist proceeds to delve into the past as though it were an organism, and ultimately finds the key in some dark recess of which we ourselves are unaware. What he finds, however, is merely another sort of justification. To the existentialist's affirmation of man's total responsibility, the psychoanalyst opposes a doctrine of inevitable innocence, for the source of our behavior is always "somewhere else," like a sort of baggage we can never check. And yet the duality remains. For surely we must never forget the pure "I" which, somehow, is carrying the baggage. This "I," once again, is our liberty. Since it is, as we have seen, a sort of emptiness, perhaps not unlike Pascal's abyss, it has no characteristics whatever. Sartre calls it the "for-itself" as opposed to essence, the "in-itself." By this he means that no man can ever "be" this or that, he can only project to be this or that. Honest or dishonest, ill-tempered or charming, cowardly or brave, these are like projects of what we propose to be, and being projects they are perpetually liable to revision. At any moment we can choose to be something else. Since human liberty is always intact, human character is never a reality, but merely a possibility. The only reality is human action. The key to our behavior is not to be found in the past but in the future, for whatever we do, the character we seek to found is always in some way future to our project to found it. This is why Sartre says of his own characters that each one "after having done anything whatsoever, can do anything whatsoever."

Finally, if man's fundamental desire is to attain what we may call the certitude of being, and if his very liberty is employed in a constant seeking of its own denial, then all our justifications, all our flights, all our fabrications, are them-

selves manifestations of that liberty. So that we are not only condemned to be free; at the same time we are condemned to deny our freedom. This is why I have hinted earlier that for the existentialist human existence is self-contradictory. For it would not be strictly true to affirm that our existence *is* our liberty, any more than one could say that it consists in the suppression of liberty. In reality it is both at once, like two mirrors whose absurd function is to reflect each other, and we are led to the rather dismal conclusion that, existentially speaking, man is a failure, or, as Sartre says, "a useless passion," for he is that being who affirms himself in denying himself, whose existence is manifested in the negation of existence. It is true that for Hegel, too, "there is nothing in heaven and on earth which does not contain in itself being and nothingness"; but his concern, after all, was with logic, and this enabled him to build an extraordinary pyramid at whose summit, magnificently enthroned, was God. One might say that it was with the same scrupulous attention to principle that Marconi constructed the first wireless. For the existentialist, however—and I am obliged at this point to go back to Kierkegaard, for Sartre himself is mute on the subject—no structure, no matter how complex, can reach God, because the space that separates us from Him is infinite. He can only be reached by some sort of action absolutely opposed to logic, which can best be described as a sort of leap, and this leap is our faith.

Generally speaking, however, Sartre avoids the religious questions that existentialism raises, as manifest as they are, and like Heidegger insists upon the necessity for the existentialist thinker to remain strictly in the sphere of human subjectivity. This has led Sartre's critics to object that existentialism is a solipsism, to which Sartre himself replies that it is

really a humanism, whereupon his critics retort that if it is a humanism it is a singularly pessimistic one. For one thing, he has not tried to fit man into a larger scheme of things; he has not, like Nietzsche and Bergson, assured us that he is going on to a bigger and better future. Perhaps he would subscribe to Baudelaire's famous remark that "the world is coming to an end—the only reason for it to continue is that it exists." Certainly few thinkers with existentialist leanings would agree that the world is a better place today because we have frozen foods and television, and that it will be a better place tomorrow because television will be in color and three dimensions. Nor, I think, would they condemn it because our wars are getting bigger and better and because divorces and alcoholism are on the upswing. To do this requires an objective view of history, a view which many historians have claimed to enjoy, on the assumption that it is possible for an individual to disengage himself from history in order to judge it. But we have already seen that a major theme of existentialism is that we *are* engaged, totally and inevitably: in other words, that our liberty is manifested here and now and nowhere else and at no other time. The lesson of existentialism—one that may be applied equally to occupied France and to postwar America—is that the question of the superiority of one age over another is beside the point; that there is only one crisis, and it is the one in which we are involved and which we must assume and for which we must provide the solution. It is like no other crisis because it is *our* crisis. The wars of Korea and Indo-China, the menace of Communism, the hydrogen bomb, the rising cost of living: these are somehow bound up with our existence as intimately as the clothes we wear, the houses we live in, the members of our family, and even when we are least aware of them

they hover about the edges of our situations like a mist, distant and yet somehow imminent; and in this sense it is true to say that every man is "haunted" by his historical obligations as by a ghost. Existentialism is a humanism and, indeed, an optimistic one, when it declares that man is the fabricator of his own destiny and that he is free to make of it what he will. It takes on a distinctly less optimistic cast when it affirms that his freedom is not relative but absolute, that man must fashion his own time out of nothing, that his true history is not in his past but in his future, and that not statesmen or generals or leaders of industry but each living human being is profoundly and inescapably accountable for the way of the world.

It seems, however, that we are drifting away from the existentialist's primary assertion that man is a "useless passion" and saying something that is exactly the opposite. For if man not only chooses himself but chooses the world as well, then there is nothing in the world that does not in some way derive its significance from human liberty; our moral sense itself may be said to spring from human liberty and its inevitable concomitant, human responsibility. The truth is that we have never wandered very far from the circle of contradictions to which existentialist reflection is committed, if indeed we have left it at all. Sartre's humanism finds its natural limits in human absurdity. On the one hand man is in the universe like a stranger at a ball to which he has not been invited. In all that vast formalism—that cosmic ritual—we call the universe, only man is unpredictable because only man is free, and his liberty has all the impertinence of an informality, a breach of etiquette. And yet his liberty moves about in that universe like a lord in its own domain, in a perpetual project of creation and destruction.

To this enigma there is, properly speaking, no solution. If there were, it would not be a solution at all, but merely another way of posing the enigma. There are no answers to the questions that human existence raises except other questions. This is why the existentialist philosopher, if there is such a thing as an existentialist philosopher, is given to a form of dialectic which reminds one of a mouse racing along the inside of a wheel. At every moment he is forced to refute what he affirms and affirm what he refutes, to define one horn of the human dilemma and simultaneously—if that is possible—confess that its existence is absolutely contradicted by the other. Basically, as an attempt to give a positive significance to sheer nothingness and to build upon it a system of human values—one that Heidegger, for example, has made in a brilliant and subtle essay, *What is Metaphysics?*—existentialism is a scandal in the face of logic for, as St. Thomas has said, “Everything which comes from nothing tends of itself toward nothing.” The truth is that the existentialists, being committed to paradox, are themselves paradoxical. Their method consists in a rigorous refutation of philosophical method, and yet they insist on making the refutation philosophically. This is why their accomplishment in this realm, it seems to me, amounts largely to what the newspapers call, in another connection, “a palace revolution.” Actually, by shifting the center of gravity of philosophical investigation from questions about ourselves to questions about our questions, they have moved out of the realm of philosophy altogether, into the realm of action. And yet their very endeavor to achieve what amounts after all to a kind of “relativism” of the absolute, an uneasy pact between subjectivity and circumstance, or more broadly, between idealism and materialism, is exceedingly dangerous when, as recently in Sartre’s case, it is projected on the politi-

cal level, for then ambiguity becomes equivocation, if not pure and simple charlatanism; and it is small wonder that Sartre himself has been attacked in France with equal ferocity by those at the Center and those at the Left, and that he has alternately attacked and flirted with both opponents. For surely not the smallest of the inconsistencies to which the student of existentialist doctrine is exposed is the belief that one can "be" an existentialist in the same way, for example, as one can be a vegetarian, a Rosicrucian, or a Democrat. One can, perhaps, live "existentially," that is to say, lucidly, freely, and courageously, but because existentialism itself is situated at some indefinable point between philosophy and life, its position is no position at all. Nietzsche used to say that the charm of a theory is that it can be refuted. The bewildering thing about existentialism is that to the objection, "But my dear fellow, what you are saying is completely absurd," its apologists reply: "Precisely. Now we are beginning to understand each other."

LESTER MANSFIELD